

2015-J199

LEGISLATIVE RESOLUTION celebrating the life and accomplishments of Maya Angelou, acclaimed African-American poet, influential memoirist and playwright

WHEREAS, It is the sense of this Legislative Body, representing the people of the State of New York, to pay tribute to an extraordinary woman of indomitable faith and dedication whose purposeful life and accomplishments will forever stand as a paradigm and inspiration for others; and

WHEREAS, Much admired African-American poet, storyteller, civil rights activist and autobiographer, Maya Angelou died on Wednesday, May 28, 2014, at the age of 86; and

WHEREAS, Born Marguerite Ann Johnson on April 4, 1928, to Bailey Johnson, Sr. and Vivian Baxter, Maya Angelou also had a broad career as a singer, dancer, actress, composer, and Hollywood's first female African-American director; and

WHEREAS, After her parents' marriage ended, three-year-old Maya, along with her four-year-old brother, Bailey, was sent to live with their grandmother, Annie Henderson, in Stamps, Arkansas; and

WHEREAS, Unable to pronounce her name because of a stutter, Bailey called her "My" for "My sister"; a few years later, when he read a book about the Maya Indians, he began to call her "Maya," and the name stuck; and

WHEREAS, As a teenager, now living with her mother in San Francisco, Maya attended Mission High School and won a scholarship to study dance and drama at San Francisco's Labor School; she dropped out of school to become the first black female streetcar conductor; and

WHEREAS, At the age of 16, Maya Angelou gave birth to her son, Guy, and worked as a waitress and cook to support them; she never lost sight

of her dreams and talents for music, dance, performance and poetry; and WHEREAS, In 1952, she married a Greek sailor named Anastasios Angelopoulos; when she began her career as a nightclub singer, she took the professional name Maya Angelou, combining her childhood nickname with a form of her husband's name; and

WHEREAS, In 1969, Maya Angelou's first of six autobiographies, I KNOW WHY THE CAGED BIRD SINGS, which describes in lyrical, unsparing prose her childhood in the Jim Crow South, was published; and

WHEREAS, The other five autobiographic volumes include GATHER TOGETHER IN MY NAME (1974), which begins when Angelou is seventeen and a new mother; SINGIN' AND SWINGIN' AND GETTIN' MERRY LIKE CHRISTMAS, an account of her tour in Europe and Africa with Porgy and Bess; THE HEART OF A WOMAN (1981), a description of Angelou's acting and writing career in New York and her work for the civil rights movement; and ALL GOD'S CHILDREN NEED TRAVELING SHOES (1986), which recounts Angelou's travels in West Africa and her decision to return, without her son, to America; and

WHEREAS, By the age of 40, Maya Angelou was a Tony-nominated stage actress for the part she played on Broadway in "Look Away"; the Reynolds Professor of American Studies at Wake Forest University; a ubiquitous presence on the lecture circuit; a frequent guest on television shows, from "Oprah" to "Sesame Street"; and an actress who portrayed Kunta Kinte's grandmother in "Roots" and appeared in "How to Make an American Quilt"; and

WHEREAS, She was also the subject of a series of scholarly studies; dancer; calypso singer; magazine editor; official of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference; and friend or associate of some of the most eminent African-Americans of the mid-20th Century, including James Bald-

win, Toni Morrison, Nelson Mandela, The Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X; and

WHEREAS, As renowned as she was for her memoirs, Maya Angelou will

also be remembered for the inaugural poem "On the Pulse of Morning" which she wrote and delivered in January of 1993, at the swearing-in of President Bill Clinton upon his request; and

WHEREAS, Furthermore, Maya Angelou was invited by successive Presidents of the United States to serve in various capacities; President Ford appointed her to the American Revolution Bicentennial Commission, President Carter invited her to serve on the Presidential Commission for the International Year of the Woman, and in February of 2011, President Obama presented her with the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the country's highest civilian honor; and

WHEREAS, In addition to her six autobiographies, Maya Angelou's other books include the volumes of poetry, JUST GIVE ME A COOL DRINK OF WATER 'FORE I DIIE (1971), OH PRAY MY WINGS ARE GONNA FIT ME WELL (1975), AND STILL I RISE (1978) and SHAKER, WHY DON'T YOU SING? (1983); in addition, she released an album of songs, "Miss Calypso," in 1957; and

WHEREAS, Throughout her writings, Maya Angelou explored the concepts of personal identity and resilience through the multifaceted lens of race, sex, family, community and the collective past; as a whole, her work offered a sharp and clear examination of the ways in which the socially marginalizing forces of racism and sexism played out at the level of the individual; and

WHEREAS, I KNOW WHY THE CAGED BIRD SINGS speaks in powerful and harrowing ways about the rape of Maya Angelou as an eight year old child and how this singularly traumatic act affected her life; this courageous story was particularly moving given that the topic of rape and sexual abuse was rarely ever spoken or written about at this time; this universal work opened the door of conversation for many on the subject and it is regarded not only as an incredible literary accomplishment but also as a catalyst of awareness and advocacy; and

WHEREAS, Maya Angelou was an accomplished poet who wrote prose with the same luminescence, honesty, imagery, humanity and realism that characterized her autobiographical books; her works have inspired gener-

ations and include, STILL I RISE, A BRAVE AND STARTLING TRUTH, ALONE, THE ROCK CRIES OUT TO US TODAY, and WE HAD HIM; furthermore, in 1978 she wrote PHENOMENAL WOMAN; her magnum opus in prose, a work which has grown and transcended over the years into the BLACK WOMAN'S NATIONAL ANTHEM; and

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WHEREAS, Maya Angelou called Harlem home for over 50 years, and lived at 58 West 120th Street in Mount Morris Park section of Harlem; she was known as a kind, compassionate and generous neighbor to all; furthermore, she gave her time, her voice, her words and her inspiration to the community she dearly loved; she conducted regular sittings with her Harlem neighbors at her home and enjoyed shopping at the local Fairway and Fine Fare supermarkets in anticipation of cooking dinner for her guests; additionally, she made regular appearances at the Faison Firehouse Theater, Minton's Playhouse, Sylvia's, the Red Rooster, the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture and at local elementary schools throughout Harlem; and

WHEREAS, Maya Angelou was a seminal figure in the Harlem Writers Guild throughout the 1950s and 1960s and actively performed at the renowned Apollo Theater during this period, including appearances in "Porgy and Bess" alongside her dancing partner Alvin Ailey; and

WHEREAS, Maya Angelou was exceptionally active during the civil rights movement, serving as Coordinator of the New York office of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) and as Co-Founder of the Organ-

ization of Afro-American Unity, established in 1964 alongside Malcolm X; and

WHEREAS, In 2010, Maya Angelou donated her archives to the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture at 135th Street and Lenox Avenue in Harlem; over 340 boxes, representing her life's work, are housed in the heart of Harlem, including a draft of her singular biography, I KNOW WHY THE CAGED BIRD SINGS, handwritten notes concerning her other timeless

works and correspondence with James Baldwin, Malcolm X and Coretta Scott King, among others; and

WHEREAS, Maya Angelou fittingly became a national figure, serving as an inspirational role model; her warm smile, true compassion and sensitivity were generously given for the benefit of countless others and their quality of life; now, therefore, be it

RESOLVED, That this Legislative Body pause in its deliberations to celebrate the life and accomplishments of Maya Angelou, acclaimed African-American poet, influential memoirist and playwright; and be it further

RESOLVED, That a copy of this Resolution, suitably engrossed, be transmitted to the family of Maya Angelou.